



Putting civics to the test: The impact of state-level civics assessments on civic knowledge

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Key points:

- The national debate over the efficacy of state-level exams has largely ignored whether assessments in civics enhance democratic education, but a 2012 national survey of 18–24-year-olds substantiates the hypothesis that civics assessments matter for civic education.
- While civics assessments required for high school graduation do not appear to influence voter turnout or party identification, they do lead to greater civic knowledge in youths, with the greatest gains among African Americans, Hispanics, and immigrants—especially Hispanic immigrants.
- Future research should specifically address why required civics assessments are effective, what happens to civic knowledge when states adopt or eliminate their civics assessments, and whether the behavior of students, teachers, and administrators changes when a new civics assessment is introduced.

Executive Summary

In spite of the national debate over the efficacy of state-level exams, whether assessments in civics enhance democratic education remains largely unexamined. This paper uses a large 2012 national survey of 18–24-year-olds to examine the potential effect of civics assessments on civic outcomes. In doing so, it strives to answer three questions:

1. Do civics assessments matter?

Yes, but only assessments that are required for high school graduation (that is, “consequential civics assessments”).

2. For what outcomes do civics assessments matter?

Consequential civics assessments lead to greater civic knowledge but do not foster greater voter participation. Nor do they influence partisan or ideological leanings.

3. For whom do civics assessments matter most?

Consequential civics assessments lead to the greatest gains in civic knowledge among African American, Hispanic, and immigrant youth—especially Hispanic immigrants. These assessments, however, do not have a systematic effect on the methods used for teaching civics. Future research should therefore focus on how students, teachers, and administrators adapt to the presence of consequential assessments in civic education.

Amidst the cut and thrust of debate over American education policy, the civic dimension of our public education system often gets short shrift. The relative inattention to civic education is both lamentable and ironic given that civic education—that is, preparation for democratic citizenship—was originally a primary objective of the public school system.

This inattention means that civic education is often relegated to the sidelines in the discussion of concrete initiatives within education policy, even though all states have developed standards for civics (or related subjects, like social studies) and 40 states require students to complete at least one civics course.¹ Accountability, and assessment specifically, figure among the most contentious issues within education policy, yet civics has largely been left out of the discussion.

The debate over assessment centers on fundamental questions such as how students should be assessed, particularly at the state level, and whether assessment results in accountability and thus higher academic performance. Since the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—and in some states, since well before that—students have taken statewide standardized exams designed to ensure their competence in key subjects. In most states, civics is not included within the statewide testing regimen, and the general trend has been for states to drop civics assessments.² In particular, NCLB does not include civics among the subjects in which students must be tested. As a result, little is known about whether statewide assessments in civics make any difference.

For other subjects, notably math and reading, some evidence suggests that statewide assessments—typically, exams—boost student performance.³ However, this finding remains contentious, as some studies conclude that there are deleterious consequences of statewide assessment and accountability standards.⁴ Nonetheless, proponents of assessment argue that well-designed accountability measures spur students, teachers, and administrators alike to adopt the best practices to boost students’ academic performance.

If the assessments are indeed designed well, then students—and, relatedly, their teachers and administrators—can be appropriately evaluated by the exams. By this logic, teacher evaluation would not require monitoring teachers’ specific pedagogical practices but instead only the outcomes of their students’ performance. That is, the focus would be on the ends and not the means, leaving teachers to determine the optimal methods to achieve the objective of their students’ strong performance on assessments.

Similarly, administrators are left to decide which instructors should be teaching civics. Obviously, in practice there are many factors outside of the classroom that affect students’ performance, which is one reason why assessment is a controversial topic. Should teachers only be evaluated based on changes in their students’ performance (that is, value-added analysis)? Should an assessment take into account possible confounding factors, such as the socioeconomic status of the students? What does a fair and informative assessment entail?

While contentious, the debate over assessments has the virtue of being grounded in empirical analysis. A huge volume of data exists on those subjects—primarily math and reading—that has been subjected to testing. In other words, there can be a debate because there is something to debate.

The Who, What, and Why of Civics Assessments

In sharp contrast to the large literature on assessments’ effects regarding math and reading, very few studies have examined what effect, if any, statewide assessments in civics and related subjects have on civic education. And to the extent that there has been any research on state-level policies regarding civic education—including but not limited to assessments—these studies have concluded that these policies have no discernible effect on civic attitudes and behavior.⁵ Yet these

studies are few, so notwithstanding their null findings, this paper proceeds from the premise that the issue is not yet settled and thus poses the question anew: do civics assessments matter for civic education?

The current research into this question resembles past literature on the more general question of whether civics courses have any effect on young people's beliefs and actions. For decades, there was a virtual consensus that civics courses had little effect, based largely on research done in the 1960s. More recently, however, a growing body of research has found that civics courses can have an effect, even if those effects are relatively modest.⁶ A common explanation for the limited effect is that civics, unlike many other subjects, can be learned outside the classroom by, for example, conversations with parents or following the news.

An alternative explanation, however, could be that the stakes are low for both students and teachers when it comes to the subject of civics. Absent an external assessment of what students are learning in civics courses, perhaps both students and teachers do not prioritize the subject. If so, we should not be surprised that civics courses have little measurable impact on students.

Civics courses consequently have little impact. It would stand to reason that having a civics assessment increases the seriousness with which teachers and students treat civics, leading to measurable results. That is, an assessment in civics means better performance in civic outcomes. (Later, I address in detail what civic outcomes should be measured.)

Scholars, policymakers, and teachers who focus on civic education have debated the utility of civics assessments, specifically whether civics should be included among the subjects examined within accountability systems established under NCLB. On the one hand, there are those who worry that the nature of civics does not lend itself to standardized assessment. These opponents to civics testing worry that a systematic form of assessment will narrow civic education to only what appears on a standardized exam. In other words, they are concerned that civic education will merely become an exercise in teaching to the test—specifically, a test that does not cover the full range of what successful civic education should entail.

On the other hand, some civic educators worry that the absence of civics assessment devalues its significance as a subject, which means that it receives too little time, attention, and resources. In a 2010 AEI Program on American Citizenship survey of high school social studies teachers, an

overwhelming majority—93 percent—said they would prefer that civics (social studies) be subject to regular testing to ensure that it was not ignored, even though many are also critical of the testing required by NCLB.⁷

Much of the debate over including civics as a subject for assessment rests on what civic education should encompass. Should it center on knowledge? If so, knowledge of what? Should civic education be defined to include the skills necessary for participation in the public square, such as public speaking and running meetings?⁸ Should civic educators teach students to have certain dispositions, such as tolerance for differing viewpoints and a sense of civic responsibility?⁹ If so, should these dispositions be evaluated?

While an interesting and spirited debate centers on the question of what civic education should include, my analysis focuses on the civics outcome with the broadest consensus: knowledge. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Exam, for example, includes only factual questions about the how, what, when, and why of American government and does not attempt to examine civics skills or dispositions.

Recently, Peter Levine and Richard Niemi, two well-known scholars of civic education, called for renewed attention to the sort of knowledge we should expect young people to have. They suggested that civic educators should focus on ensuring that their students are fluent in current events, as this is more likely to spur their engagement in the political process than the traditional emphasis on constitutional basics (for example, understanding how a bill becomes a law or how the Constitution can be amended).¹⁰ The data employed in this paper include both types of knowledge, namely that of the contemporary political landscape and some constitutional fundamentals.

Decades of research support an emphasis on civic knowledge, as numerous studies have shown that knowledge is a precursor to civic engagement.¹¹ But even absent a familiarity with this research, it seems self-evident that a representative democracy rests on an informed electorate. Social scientists debate the level of knowledge needed for democracy to function properly, but no one seriously questions the intrinsic need for an electorate comprised of voters who have at least a modicum of knowledge about how their government works. Furthermore, it seems sensible that if a course of study has any effect, it would be to increase knowledge within that subject area.

While the analysis to follow will center on knowledge as the most plausible and defensible civic outcome to be measured, it will also examine other potential civic outcomes that previous research has suggested fall within the purview of civic education—specifically, whether statewide civics assessments have an effect on young people’s political participation. (Are young people who took civics assessments in high school more likely to turn out to vote?)

And even though civic education is ostensibly nonpartisan, the heated debates over civics standards, and over civics’ close cousin history, suggest a concern that civics entails political indoctrination.¹² Consequently, my analysis will also examine whether civics assessments have an effect on either party identification or political ideology.

In sum, assuming that civics assessments do have an effect on outcomes, in the next part of the paper I examine the specific outcomes for which they matter, hypothesizing that assessments have a bearing on political knowledge. The analysis then turns to ask: For whom do civics assessments matter most? Do they have the same effect across all student groups, or do they matter more for some students?

The fact that US public schools were created for civic purposes underscores that the nation’s education system has long served as the proverbial melting pot. Public schools bring together young people of many different ethnicities to forge a common identity and to school them in democratic virtues, such as respect for the symbols and institutions of government, a sense of civic responsibility, and an appreciation for individual rights. In short, the public schools have been a leading institution for creating *unum* out of *pluribus*. One important aspect of this great melting together is teaching young immigrants and children of immigrants about America’s system of government, thus preparing—and motivating—they for participation in the nation’s political life.¹³

Similarly, past research on civic education has shown that formal instruction in civics matters most among students who are otherwise the least exposed to politics. A seminal study of civic education, conducted in 1965, concluded that while civics courses had little effect on students in general, they did lead to greater civic knowledge, efficacy, tolerance, and sense of civic duty for African American students.¹⁴ In 1965, there was every reason to think that African American youth had little exposure to conventional political activity in the home, given that they had been raised in an era of overt racism nationwide and formal disenfranchisement in the Jim Crow South.

While subsequent research has not always found a greater effect for civic education among disadvantaged youth, enough studies have that it remains a viable hypothesis. Specifically, to the extent that civics assessments lead to improved civic education, the extant literature suggests that assessments would have the biggest effect for immigrants and members of minority groups, two categories that obviously overlap. In particular, we should expect that immigrants would benefit most from civics instruction, as they are likely to have the least experience with the US political system.

To summarize, past research has suggested that civics assessments—or any state-level policies or standards regarding civic education—have no measurable effect on civic outcomes within the youth population. This paper revisits that conclusion by focusing on three interrelated questions and drawing on the existing literature to suggest what the answers might be.

1. Do civics assessments matter?

The general literature on accountability measures suggests that, under some circumstances, assessments in subjects other than civics can incentivize educators and students to improve their academic performance. It stands to reason that they would have the same effect for civics.

2. For what outcomes do civics assessments matter?

If civics classes—and, specifically, statewide assessments—are to make a difference, they are most likely to have an impact on factual knowledge about the political process and institutions.

3. For whom do civics assessments matter most?

Past research suggests that civic education in general matters most for students who have the least exposure to the nation's politics in their homes, which points toward a larger effect for immigrants and members of other minority groups.

I am thus suggesting that past research has cast too wide a net in looking for the effects of state standards in civics. The effect of civic education can be subtle and there is no reason to assume that it matters equally for everyone in the population. As I explain later, the data do indeed

indicate that civics assessments (with academic consequences) appear to boost political knowledge among young people, especially among African American, Hispanic, and immigrant youth. Consequential assessments have the biggest impact of all on Hispanic immigrants.

After presenting evidence that youth educated in states with a civics assessment have greater political knowledge, the remainder of the paper examines why. Does a civics assessment systematically affect civics pedagogy? Is civics taught differently (presumably, better) in states with an assessment system? The answer is elusive in existing data. However, the absence of a single explanation may itself be an important insight into effective civics instruction: perhaps it is best to “let a thousand flowers bloom” and leave it to teachers to determine the most effective means of achieving the end of ensuring that their students have the necessary level of political knowledge to be informed citizens.

Analysis

One reason for the lack of attention to civics is the relatively scarce amount of data available on the subject, especially when compared to other academic subjects, such as math and reading. Fortunately, a recent survey is an important correction to that lacuna. In 2012, the Spencer Foundation funded a survey conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and supplemented with data on statewide civics standards collected with the support of the Bechtel Foundation. These data are ideally designed to answer the three questions I have posed:¹⁵

1. Do civics assessments matter?

The Spencer survey was limited to 18–24-year-olds, the group where we are most likely to see an effect for civic education. The survey contained a nationally representative sample of 4,483 US citizens. In addition to a wide array of information gathered about each of the respondents, including detailed demographic data, CIRCLE researchers incorporated data on the characteristics of the respondents’ states. This includes standards and requirements for civic education in the state where the respondent attended high school. Respondents were also asked detailed questions about their experiences in high school, including the general climate of the school and the specific pedagogical practices used in civics-related (social studies) classes.

2. For what outcomes do civics assessments matter?

The survey asks a wide array of questions to gauge civic attitudes and behaviors. These include voter turnout in the 2012 election and, critically for this study, a battery of questions to measure respondents' civic knowledge.

3. For whom do civics assessments matter most?

The survey's large sample size enables reliable analysis of subgroups within the population, such as immigrants and minorities.

The logic of the analysis is straightforward: do young people who attended high school in states with a civics assessment have greater knowledge about government and politics than those who did not?¹⁶ The first step in answering this question requires identifying those states with such an assessment, and states are either coded as having such an assessment or not.¹⁷ As of 2012, there were 21 states with such an assessment. This subset of states reflects the diversity of the nation. (See table 1.)

The 21 states are geographically diverse, as they are not concentrated in any single region, and they are economically diverse, as their average household income ranges from \$45,000 to \$72,000. Moreover, they are racially diverse, with the states' Hispanic populations ranging from 1.2 percent to 46.3 percent and their African American populations ranging from 2.1 percent to 37 percent. They are also politically diverse, as 8 states went for Obama in 2012 and 13 went for Romney.

Finally, they are educationally diverse, as their NAEP scores range from 251 to 269 (national average is 263) in reading and from 265 to 289 (national average is 282) in math. Their per-pupil expenditures for education range from \$7,500 to \$19,000 (national average is \$11,000). While my statistical analysis will control systematically for these differences across states, a priori there is no obvious confounding factor that characterizes the assessment states. They are a cross-section of America.

Table 1. Civic Education Requirements by State

No Civics Requirement	Civics Assessment <i>without</i> Consequences
Iowa	California
Civics Course Only	Delaware
Arkansas	Indiana
Arizona	Kansas
Colorado	Louisiana
Connecticut	Michigan
District of Columbia	Missouri
Florida	Oklahoma
Hawaii	Wisconsin
Idaho	West Virginia
Illinois	
Massachusetts	Civics Assessment <i>with</i> Consequences
Maryland	Alabama
Maine	Georgia
Minnesota	Kentucky
Montana	Mississippi
North Carolina	New Mexico
North Dakota	New York
Nebraska	Ohio
New Hampshire	South Carolina
New Jersey	Tennessee
Nevada	Texas
Oregon	Virginia
Pennsylvania	
Rhode Island	
South Dakota	
Utah	
Vermont	
Washington	
Wyoming	

Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

In addition to the presence or absence of a civics assessment, the analysis tests whether the number of years civic education is required affects political knowledge, since the critical factor might not be the assessment but rather the sheer amount of instruction. Even though a study by Deven Carlson found that the number of years of civic instruction has no bearing on civic knowledge (as measured by the NAEP) among high school students, this control is nonetheless included to see whether quantity of instruction affects the amount of civic knowledge that sticks past high school.¹⁸

Analysis throughout this section of the paper includes only state-level policies regarding civic education. While later analysis incorporates self-reports about the pedagogical techniques respondents recall in their high school civics classes, these reports are unavoidably clouded by self-selection. That is, people who are civically aware—and thus score higher on an index of political knowledge—are also more likely to have taken civics courses in high school, to have participated more fully in them, and perhaps even to remember them differently than their less civically aware classmates. What one person considers an enlivening classroom discussion might bore someone else to tears.

State-level policies, however, are not subject to self-selection in the same way. Admittedly, it is theoretically possible that especially civically engaged families choose to live in states with a civics assessment, but that seems implausible. Civics requirements within a state are hardly common knowledge and it strains credulity to suggest that a state's civic education requirements are a drawing card for potential move-ins.

A more plausible concern is that policies across a given state are not implemented consistently or, in some districts and schools, even ignored altogether. Given implementation uncertainty, any effects observed in this analysis should be considered a lower bound. A medical trial to test a new medicine provides a useful analogy. In such a trial, not every patient takes the pill as prescribed—either out of forgetfulness or inattention. Thus, medical researchers consider all the subjects assigned to take the pill as the “intention to treat” group, whether those subjects actually comply with the protocol or not. The analysis then measures whether the pill has an effect, on average, within the intention-to-treat group, even though some members of the group may not have followed the protocol.

This is done because, should a drug come to market, it will not always be used correctly and the medical community wants to determine the aggregate effect of the experimental treatment. States with a civics assessment (or any state-level policy) are like the intention-to-treat group, as not all districts and schools will necessarily follow protocol and comply with the rule.¹⁹ The question is whether the policy being analyzed has an effect on the aggregate, notwithstanding the uncertainties in implementation.

The primary outcome of interest is political knowledge, which is measured with an index of six questions. While a survey of this type cannot have the same breadth of items as an exam such as the NAEP, these questions include some fundamentals of how the American political system operates and some rudimentary knowledge about the current political landscape.²⁰ They are thus a good gauge of informed voting. The questions, which comprise the Civic Knowledge Index, are (with correct answers in parentheses):

1. As far as you know, does the federal government spend more on Social Security or on foreign aid? (Social Security)
2. Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other on the national level? (Yes) / Which party is more conservative? (Republican)
3. Do you happen to know which party had the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington before the election this month? (Republican)
4. How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and House to override a presidential veto? (Two-thirds)
5. Which of the following best describes who is entitled to vote in federal elections? (Multiple-choice options were residents, taxpayers, legal residents, citizens. The correct answer is citizens.)

The average score was three out of six correct. Roughly 9 percent got none of them correct, while 4 percent had a perfect score. The easiest question was whether one party was more conservative than the other (69 percent knew that, of whom 76 percent knew it was the Republican Party). The most difficult question was whether the US government spends more on Social Security or foreign aid. Only 29 percent knew that it is Social Security.

These questions should not imply that these items are either necessary or sufficient for informed democratic engagement. Rather, the intent is to have a general gauge of respondents' knowledge about politics and government. A more detailed exam would obviously provide more nuanced information, differentiating among different domains of knowledge. But such an exam would also correlate highly with this short quiz.

While blunt, this index is a serviceable measure of general civic knowledge. Indeed, its brevity—and thus limited variance—only makes it more difficult to detect a signal amidst the noise. The bias of the analysis is thus against finding an effect of statewide assessments, underscoring the substantive significance of any effect we might find.

The analysis proceeds by testing whether 18–24-year-olds who attended high school in states with a civics assessment have greater civic knowledge. More formally, the Civic Knowledge Index is regressed on civics assessment, but with a host of control variables to ensure that the effect of the assessment has been isolated from potentially confounding factors. In other words, the analysis is designed to eliminate concern that what appears to be the effect of a civics assessment is really the effect of something else that either describes the states that have assessments or the people who live in such states. To ensure an apples-to-apples comparison, the same variables are used in the models for each civic outcome discussed in this paper.

The statistical analysis controls for a host of individual-level characteristics, including race or ethnicity (whether the respondent is African American, Asian American, or Hispanic), immigrant status, gender, and age. In addition, the model accounts for educational attainment but, because many of these respondents are still pursuing their education, it includes both the highest level of education attained and whether the respondent is currently enrolled in school.

Although household income is typically used as a measure of socioeconomic status, income can be misleading for this age group. For one, it is not clear whether the appropriate income to be measured is respondents' own or their parents'. In the former case, income often appears misleadingly low because respondents are in school or just starting a career. In the latter, they often do not know their parents' income.

Consequently, intellectual stimulation in the childhood home better captures the presumed influence of social class, measured with the deceptively simple question, “When you were growing up, about how many books were there in your home?” The choice of answers includes a few (0–10), enough to fill one shelf (11–25), enough to fill one bookcase (26–100), or enough to fill several bookcases (more than 100). This simple question efficiently yet powerfully measures the intellectual climate within the home, which is one important way social class affects all educational performance, including civics.²¹

To ensure that a civics assessment is not masking other state-level characteristics, the analysis also accounts for students' general academic performance in the states where the respondents went to high school, measured with mean NAEP scores in math and reading. The model also controls for each state's average per-pupil expenditure and median household income.

Since the survey was conducted during 2012, a presidential election year, it is also important to account for any possible effects of the political environment of the state in which respondents were living in 2012. These include the past level of turnout among 18–24-year-olds (measured as 2010 turnout in the Current Population Survey) and the degree of electoral competition in 2012. Historically high levels of turnout and contemporaneous political competition could foster greater political engagement and, potentially, knowledge.²²

Do Civics Assessments Matter? The analysis begins with the fundamental question of whether respondents who attended high school in states with a civics assessment have greater civic knowledge. In a nutshell, the answer is yes. Students who attended high school in a state without a civics assessment scored, on average, 2.8 out of 6.0 on the knowledge scale. Those who were educated in states with an assessment scored 3.03, a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$).

Importantly, the presence of a civics assessment has the effect, not the number of civics courses students are required to take. This finding is notable in light of the high bar for finding any statistically significant effect, given the shortcomings of a six-item knowledge index. However, it is just as important to ask whether an increase of 0.23 on the scale has a substantive significance—intrinsically a more subjective judgment. One useful benchmark is comparing the effect size for a civics assessment to other factors that have a statistically meaningful impact on civic knowledge. In making this comparison, the presence of a civics assessment has what can be described as a moderate effect, comparable to, for example, being raised in a home with several bookcases instead of only one.

But not all civics assessments are created equal. In some assessment states, the civics exam has no bearing on whether a student graduates from high school. In others, graduation does not require earning a certain score on the assessment, but the assessment nonetheless counts toward a grade in a civics course. In still others, the assessment is a graduation requirement. Essentially, the analysis asks whether the stringency of the requirement matters. Do students have higher

knowledge when the state-administered civics exam has consequences for graduating high school?

Of the 21 states with a civics assessment, a total of 11 either require the exam for graduation (9 states) or count it toward a final grade in a required civics course (2 states). Because it is not clear that the consequences are more or less severe under one system than another, these 11 states have been combined into a single category and thus treated as functional equivalents.

Even though they are a subset of a subset, this group of 11 states (listed in table 1) is nonetheless broadly representative of the United States. Their average median income is \$55,000, their Hispanic population ranges from 2.7 to 46.3 percent (average is 13 percent), their African American population ranges from 2.1 to 37 percent (average is 19 percent), four of them favored Obama in 2012, their NAEP math scores range from 265 to 287 (average is 278), and their NAEP reading scores run from 251 to 269 (average is 260).

To answer whether it matters if the civics assessment has academic consequences, the binary measure of whether a state has an assessment is replaced with a series of dichotomous variables that indicate whether the state falls within one of the following categories:

1. No civics requirement or assessment
2. State requires a civics course but no assessment
3. State requires a civics course and has an assessment, but the assessment has no bearing on graduation or grades
4. State requires a civics course, has an assessment, and the assessment has consequences.

Either it counts toward a grade in a civics course that is required for graduation, or it is by itself a graduation requirement.

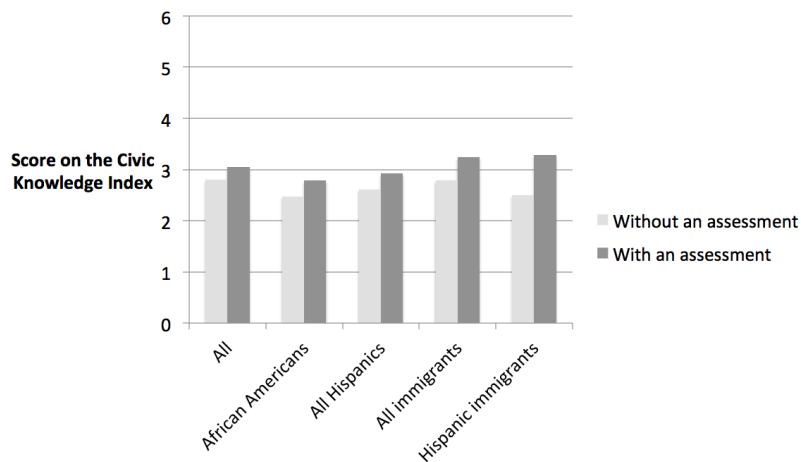
The results show that consequences matter (details of the statistical models can be found in Appendix 1). Whether it is the general population as a whole or a subset (minorities or immigrants), civics assessments with academic consequences correspond with greater political knowledge. As shown in figure 1, for the population as a whole, respondents who attended high school in states that have consequential assessments score about .20 higher on the political knowledge scale, essentially the same as in the analysis that only measured whether there is an assessment without regard for potential consequences.²³

Are these effects substantively significant? As displayed in figure 2, among the general population, a consequential assessment has an effect comparable to other factors long known to correlate with higher political knowledge, such as education level, home environment, age, and gender.²⁴

Whatever its substantive size, finding any statistically significant effect for civics assessments is remarkable, especially given the noisiness of measuring civic knowledge and, presumably, uneven implementation of the state-level requirement. Furthermore, previous research has failed to find any effect for any state-level civic education policy on any outcome.

The analysis, however, shows evidence that even when accounting for a wide variety of potentially confounding explanations, the signal of the civics assessment can be detected amidst the noise. On the other hand, though, the size of the effect is roughly comparable to other factors known to affect political knowledge, suggesting that when we look at the youth population as a whole, civics assessments play a meaningful but modest role in fostering political knowledge. So, do civics assessments matter? Yes, but—for the population as a whole at least—only modestly.

Figure 1. Consequential Civics Assessments Correspond with Greater Civic Knowledge



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

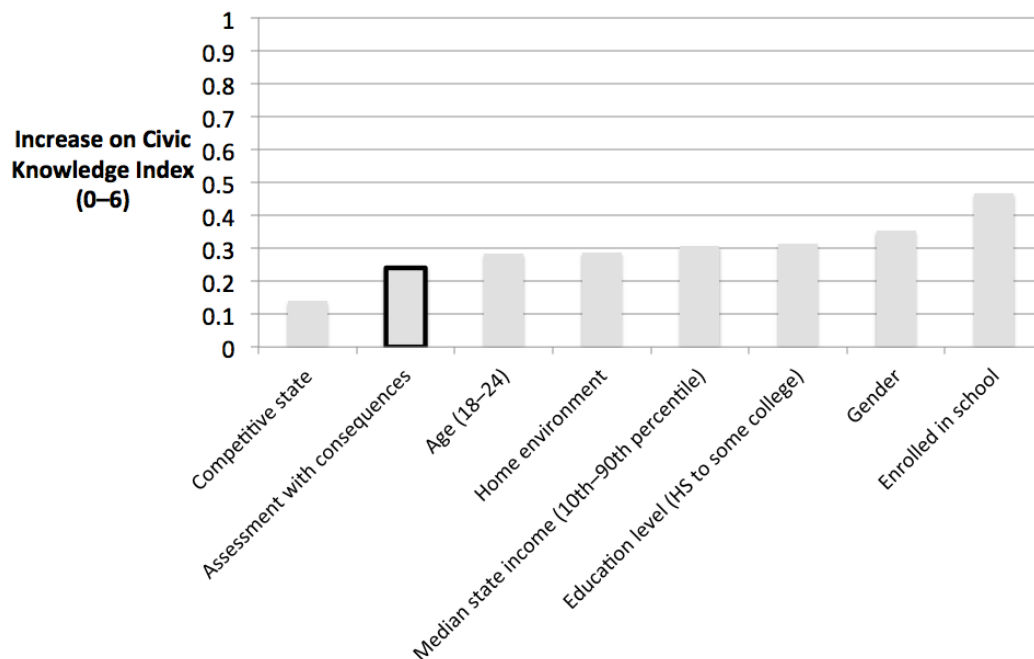
Note: This figure shows the effect of an assessment with academic consequences and includes statistical controls.

For What Outcomes Do Civics Assessments Matter? Thus far, my discussion of the analysis has centered on civic knowledge, the most empirically plausible—and, arguably, normatively defensible—outcome of civic education provided by public schools. As noted, however, “civic engagement” is multifaceted and it is thus possible that civic education would have an effect on more than what people know. Does it also affect how they think and what they do?

The short answer is no. State assessments, specifically those with academic consequences, had no effect on voter turnout in the 2012 election. Nor did they have any effect on young people’s party identification or whether their political ideology leans to the left or right. (See Appendix 1 for details of this analysis.)

In short, as hypothesized, only civic knowledge is affected by whether a young person attended high school in a state with a consequential civics assessment. Note, however, that the Spencer survey did not attempt to measure civic skills or dispositions such as tolerance or efficacy, and so it must be left to future research to determine if these are also affected by the presence of a civics assessment.

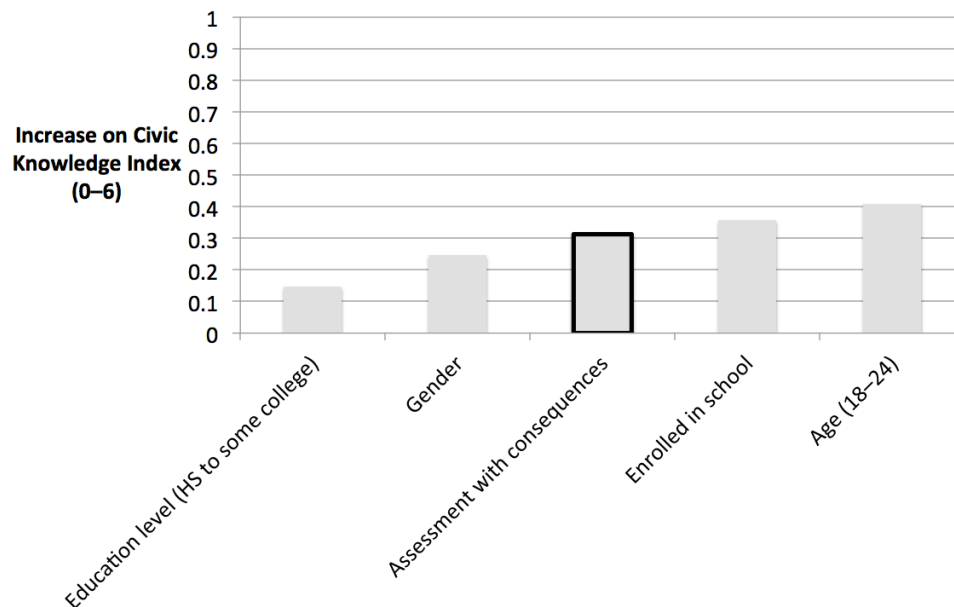
Figure 2(a). Comparing the Effect of a Consequential Civics Assessment with Other Factors Affecting Civic Knowledge (General Population)



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

Note: This figure includes statistical controls.

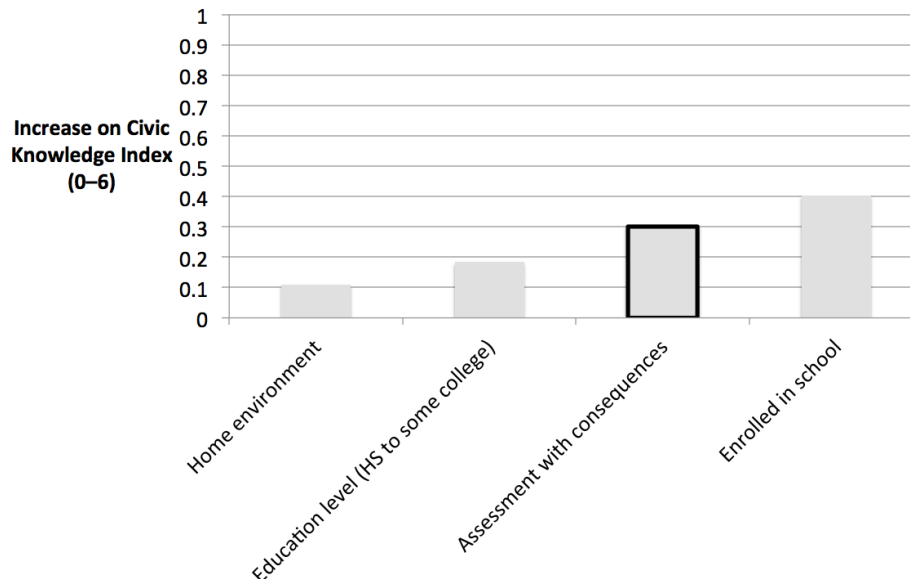
Figure 2(b). Comparing the Effect of a Consequential Civics Assessment with Other Factors Affecting Civic Knowledge (African Americans)



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

Note: This figure includes statistical controls.

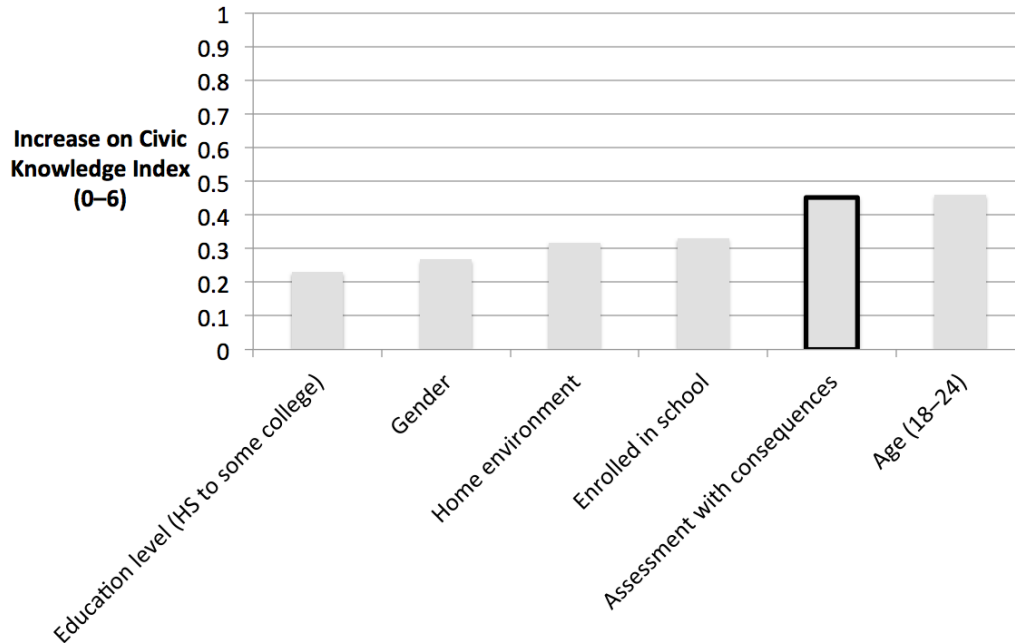
Figure 2(c). Comparing the Effect of a Consequential Civics Assessment with Other Factors Affecting Civic Knowledge (All Hispanics)



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

Note: This figure includes statistical controls.

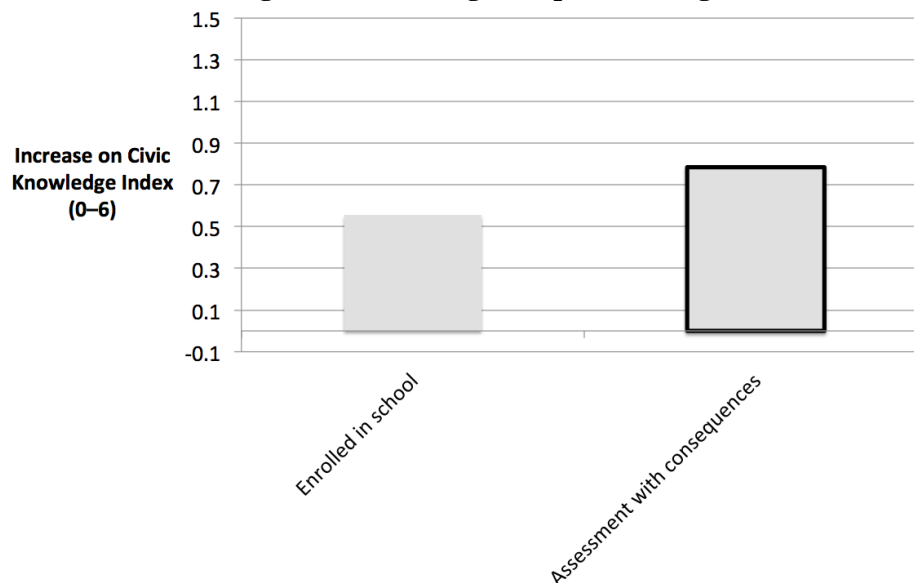
Figure 2(d). Comparing the Effect of a Consequential Civics Assessment with Other Factors Affecting Civic Knowledge (All Immigrants)



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

Note: This figure includes statistical controls.

Figure 2(e). Comparing the Effect of a Consequential Civics Assessment with Other Factors Affecting Civic Knowledge (Hispanic Immigrants)



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

Note: This figure includes statistical controls.

For Whom Do Civics Assessments Matter Most? Recall the hypothesis that civic education will have the biggest impact on both minorities and immigrants, two groups that partially overlap. To test whether this is the case, the same model is applied to African Americans, Hispanics, and immigrants.²⁵

The results confirm the expectation that civic education in the classroom has a greater effect on African American and Hispanic students (as shown in figure 1). For the general population, we have seen that the effect of a consequential civics assessment is roughly .20 points on the 6-point knowledge scale, a modest magnitude. But it is larger for African Americans and Hispanics (about 0.30 points for each).

The results also demonstrate that civics assessments with consequences have an especially large effect on the civic knowledge of immigrant students (0.45 points). The biggest effect of all is found among Hispanic immigrants: 0.78 points.²⁶

To provide a sense of substantive significance, figures 2(a) through 2(e) display how the size of the assessment effect compares to other factors that correlate with civic knowledge. For African Americans and Hispanics, a consequential civics assessment has roughly the same effect as the other variables, as is the case for the general population. For all immigrants, a consequential assessment essentially ties with age for the biggest effect. And for Hispanic immigrants, attending high school in a state that has a civics assessment with academic consequences has the single largest effect.²⁷

In other words, here we see evidence that consequential civics assessments have an especially large effect among immigrants, and Hispanic immigrants in particular, which is in keeping with the historical role of the public school system to facilitate *unum* among America's *pluribus*.

Do Civics Assessments Affect Methods of Civics Instruction?

Having established that consequential civics assessments increase civic knowledge—particularly for immigrants—the next question is why. Hopefully, the search for a definitive answer to that question will guide future research into civic education. The analysis throughout this paper takes a first step in determining why consequential assessments lead to greater civic knowledge.

Finding an answer begins with the fundamental rationale for assessments. Whether for civics or any other subject, the justification for a state-imposed assessment is the same. By providing an external measure of performance, assessments give students, teachers, and administrators an incentive to ensure that students perform well. Administrators will assign better teachers to subjects with an assessment, teachers will teach those subjects more effectively, and students will exert more effort to learn those subjects.²⁸

Thus, one promising explanation for greater civic knowledge among young people educated in states with consequential civics assessments is that civics teachers in those states use different methods in the classroom. Critics often describe civic education as dry and boring, relying on lectures and worksheets rather than stimulating discussion, meaningful projects, and other engaging pedagogical practices.²⁹ Past research has shown that an engaging classroom—particularly one where teachers encourage the open discussion of real-world issues—is an especially effective method for teaching civics, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.³⁰

The Spencer survey enables a test of whether classroom practices are affected by the presence of a consequential civics assessment. Respondents were asked whether their high school civics classes featured any of the following; for each one, they could answer yes or no:

1. In that (civics) course, did you spend much time discussing current events?
2. Did teachers encourage students in that class to discuss political and social issues in which people have different opinions?
3. Did you do research on social, political, or community issues for that class?
4. Did you do a project in the community for that class?
5. In that class, were you required to keep up with politics or government, either by reading the newspaper, watching TV, or going onto the Internet, or not? ³¹

Tallying the total positive and negative responses produces a Civics Instruction Index. Then, the same model discussed earlier can be used to predict civic outcomes and methods of civics instruction. The reasoning is that if these pedagogical practices are the explanation for the connection between consequential civics assessments and greater civic knowledge, they should be more common in states with such assessments. Likewise, since consequential civics assessments have the biggest impact on minorities and immigrants, the analysis examines whether members of these groups are especially likely to report that these teaching methods were used in their civics classes.

Unlike the analysis of civic knowledge, there is no connection between a consequential civics assessment and the frequency of the practices outlined in the five questions, whether they are combined into the Civics Instruction Index or analyzed one-by-one (results for the individual item models are not shown but available by request).

If classroom practices do not differ in states with an assessment, what might explain the apparent effect of an assessment on civic knowledge? One answer could be that there are other effective pedagogical practices employed by teachers in assessment states, in which case researchers should figure out what they are. Another explanation is that teachers do not use different methods, but simply use the same methods more effectively. Or perhaps the difference lies not in the teachers but in the students: knowing that they will have to take an exam with academic consequences, they are motivated to learn more from the same methods.

What does not appear to be happening is narrow “teaching to the test” whereby teachers focus their instruction on maximizing their students’ scores on one instrument with no regard for broader learning.³² Or, if there is teaching to the test, it appears to be working, since the civic knowledge scale used in the survey is not calibrated with any state exam(s).

Perhaps these null results teach a lesson: effective civic education cannot easily be explained by the wide-scale adoption of particular classroom practices. Civic educators may be heartened by this conclusion, as it might be that the best civic education is what teachers determine it to be based on their particular context. Rather than being followers of the cookie-cutter approach, perhaps teachers are more like artisans who customize their instruction to what works best for their own students, particularly minority and immigrant youth. They just need the right incentive to do so.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Three questions have guided the analysis throughout this paper:

1. Do civics assessments matter?
2. For what outcomes do civics assessments matter?
3. For whom do civics assessments matter most?

In brief, the answers are 1) yes, if the assessments have academic consequences; 2) political knowledge; and (c) minorities and immigrants, especially Hispanic immigrants.

Given these results, it is tempting to conclude that consequential civics assessments should be implemented nationwide. However, the rush to such a recommendation is tempered by two facts. First, while cross-sectional analysis of this type is informative, it should not be considered dispositive. Second, the answer to the question of why assessments have the effect they do remains elusive. Therefore, the next steps are to confirm the assessment effect.

At minimum, future research should examine what happens to civic knowledge when states adopt or eliminate a civics assessment. Similarly, such studies could explore whether the behavior of students, teachers, and administrators changes with the introduction of a new assessment. Randomized experiments would be even more informative. Does student knowledge increase when students are randomly assigned to an external assessment of their civic education? Likewise, randomized experiments can further explore which practices do and do not work in civic education, both in the presence and absence of a civics assessment.³³

In conclusion, this paper suggests what can be learned about civic education through necessary attention—particularly with appropriate data. With further attention and resources, much more could be learned about the effectiveness of civic education, helping ensure that all of America’s youth benefit from best practices. The state of citizenship in America would be all the stronger for it.

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Notes

1. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet Describes State Laws, Standards, and Requirements for K–12 Civics,” 2012, www.civicyouth.org/new-circle-fact-sheet-describes-state-laws-standards-and-requirements-for-k-12-civics/.

2. Courses related to civic education go by many names, including civics, government/American government, and social studies (which can also include history, geography, economics, and related subjects). For the sake of brevity, this paper refers collectively to all of these subjects as “civics.” According to CIRCLE, in 2001, 34 states regularly assessed students’ performance in social studies. By 2006, that had fallen to 21. However, Maryland and Florida have defied the general trend and tightened their social studies requirement, as they have recently added a civics requirement for high school graduation. Future research will examine the consequences of adding or removing civics requirements. See Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet.”

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4. Jonathan Supovitz, "Can High Stakes Testing Leverage Educational Improvement? Prospects from the Last Decade of Testing and Accountability Reform," *Journal of Educational Change* 10 (2009): 211–27; David Hursh, "The Growth of High-Stakes Testing in the USA: Accountability, Markets and the Decline of Educational Equality," *British Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 5 (2005): 605–22; and Sharon L. Nichols, Gene V. Glass, and David C. Berliner, "High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Does Accountability Pressure Increase Student Learning?" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–172.
5. Deven Carlson, "Out of the Classroom and Into the Voting Booth? Analyzing the Effects of Education on Political Participation" (dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison); Kei Kawashimi and Peter Levine, "Policy Effects on Informed Political Engagement," *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 5 (2014): 665–88; Lopez et al., "Schools, Education Policy, and the Future of the First Amendment," *Political Communication* 26, no. 1 (2009): 84–101.
6. Kenneth P. Langton and M. Kent Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 3 (1968): 852–67; David E. Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement Among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30, no. 4 (2008): 437–54; ; Carlson, "Out of the Classroom and Into the Voting Booth?"; Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Spote, "Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation," *American Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 3 (2008): 738–66; and Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn H. Barber, and Britt Wilkenfeld, "Latino Adolescents' Civic Development in the United States: Research Results from the IEA Civic Education Study," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36 (2007): 111–25.
7. Steve Farkas and Ann Duffet. *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do* (AEI Program on American Citizenship, 2009), www.citizenship-aei.org/2010/09/new-aei-report-high-schools-civics-and-citizenship/#.VBCt5vldV8F; and Susie Burroughs, Eric Groce, and Mary Lee Webeck, "Social Studies Education in the Age of Testing and Accountability," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* 24, no. 3 (2005): 13–20.
8. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
9. David E. Campbell, *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
10. Peter Levine, "Education for a Civil Society," in *Making Civics Count: Citizenship Education for a New Generation*, eds. David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson, and Frederick M. Hess (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press), 37–56; Niemi and Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn*.
11. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); William A. Galston, "Political Knowledge, Political Engagement, and Civic Education," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 217–34; and John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
12. Diane Ravitch, "The Controversy Over National History Standards," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 51, no. 3 (1998): 14–28.
13. Rebecca M. Callahan and Chandra Muller, *Coming of Political Age: American Schools and the Civic Development of Immigrant Youth* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013); and Torney-Purta, Barber, and Wilkenfeld, "Latino Adolescents' Civic Development in the United States."
14. Langton and Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States."
15. The survey was conducted by telephone by Universal Survey Inc. Two-thirds of the numbers called were cell phones; the rest were landlines. Interviewing began one day after the 2012 presidential election and continued for six weeks. The sampling design ensured that there are at least 75 respondents from each state. There were also oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics. The data have been weighted to match the basic demographics of

the US population, according to the March 2012 Current Population Survey. For more details on the survey, see Kawashimi and Levine, “Policy Effects on Informed Political Engagement.”

16. Respondents were asked to identify the state in which they went to high school.

17. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet.”

18. Carlson, “Out of the Classroom and Into the Voting Booth?”

19. For example, only 56 percent of respondents who attended high school in states with, ostensibly, a civics assessment report that they took “a standardized test on civics or U.S. government . . . not designed by your own teacher but required by the district or state your school was in.” There are a variety of possible explanations for why this percentage is relatively low. It could have been noncompliance on the part of schools and districts, or respondents may not remember a nonconsequential test or do not realize or recall that a given test was required by the state. Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, “New CIRCLE Fact Sheet.”

20. Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*.

21. Both educational attainment and books in the home are coded as a series of dummy variables for each category rather than as a single ordinal variable.

22. The models employ weights to match the overall demographics with the national population (see Kawashimi and Levine, “Policy Effects on Informed Political Engagement”). To account for the risk of heteroskedasticity (in other words, for respondents being clustered into states), the model employs robust standard errors and accounts for clustering by state. The analysis has also been run using hierarchical (in other words, mixed) models, and the results are substantively similar.

23. The figures in Appendix 1 include the 95 percent confidence intervals for each point estimate, which have been generated using the CLARIFY program in STATA. See Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberg, and Gary King, “CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results,” *Journal of Statistical Software* 8, no. 1 (2003).

24. Note that the coefficient for age is negative, which means that older respondents have, on average, lower civic knowledge. While this runs counter to the expectation for civic knowledge (sophistication) in the general population, where greater age is associated with more, not less, knowledge, this result for a sample of 18–24-year-olds provides still more evidence that civics instruction in high school is indeed causally related to civic knowledge. If classroom instruction leads to more knowledge, we would expect it to fade as time passes or, in other words, as these respondents get older. (Other factors explain the greater civic knowledge of people past the age of 24.)

25. When limiting the analysis to Asian American respondents, the effect is also large and statistically significant. However, Asian Americans are not included in the discussion because of their small sample size; they are correct as a proportion of the population, but small in absolute numbers (92 cases). Further research should examine the impact of civic education, and civics assessments specifically, on the Asian American population. Note that “immigrant” is operationalized as students who are either themselves immigrants to the US or who have at least one immigrant parent.

26. Underscoring the magnitude of this effect among Hispanic immigrants, the difference between its magnitude and the effect size for the general population is statistically significant. This is determined by a model in which the coefficient for an interaction term between “Hispanic immigrant” and “consequential civics assessment (CCA)” is significantly different than the effect of a CCA on the general population. Similar interaction terms for African Americans, Hispanics, and immigrants are not significant. In other words, while a CCA has larger effects for each of these groups than the general population, the differences do not achieve the conventional threshold of statistical significance ($p < .05$).

27. Note that roughly half (48 percent) of Hispanics are classified as immigrants.

28. John B. Diamond, “Accountability Policy, School Organization, and Classroom Practice: Partial Recoupling and Educational Opportunity,” *Education and Urban Society* 44, no. 2 (2012): 151–82; and Cecilia Elena Rouse et al., “Feeling the Florida Heat? How Low-Performing Schools Respond to Voucher and Accountability Pressure,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 5, no. 2 (2013): 251–81.

29. Anna Roefsky Saavedra, “Dry to Dynamic Civic Education Curricula,” in *Making Civics Count*, 135–60.

30. Campbell, “Voice in the Classroom.”

31. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they had taken “a class called something like civics, American government, or government.” If they said no, they were asked “Did you take a course by a different name in which you spent a lot of time learning about politics, government, social issues, or law?” If they answered yes to either question, they were then asked whether the class had these features. The analysis combines responses from both groups into a single index.

32. Supovitz, “Can High Stakes Testing Leverage Educational Improvement?”; and Julian Vasquez Heilig and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Accountability Texas-Style: The Progress and Learning of Urban Minority Students in a High-Stakes Testing Context,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 30, no. 2 (2008): 75–110
33. Meghan Condon, “Practice Makes Participants: How Communication Skills Acquired in School Affect Political Engagement” (dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2012); and Donald P. Green et al., “Does Knowledge of Constitutional Principles Increase Support for Civil Liberties? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment,” *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (2011): 463–76.